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The Armenia plane incident: Was the CIA involved?

By Frank Bellamy
(First of three articles)

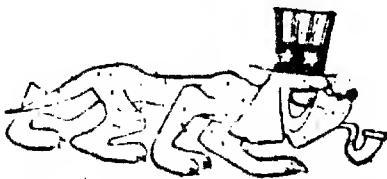
ON SEPT 2, 1958, a four-engine U.S. transport plane took off from Adana, Turkey, on what was to have been, the Air Force said, a three-legged flight north toward the Black Sea, east to Van near the border of Soviet Armenia, and thence back to Adana.

The next day the Associated Press reported from Adana that the unarmed C-130 had "disappeared" and that "an intensive search was underway" for the plane and the 17 men aboard. "Air Force officials so far did not suggest that the plane might have strayed over the Soviet border," the AP dispatch said.

Four days after the "disappearance," the State Dept. asked the Soviet government for information on the whereabouts of the plane and the 17. The Russians replied they had found a plane's wreckage 35 miles northwest of Yerevan, capital of Soviet Armenia. They turned over six bodies, four of which were identifiable as members of the C-130 crew, but insisted they had no information on the 11 others.

Nothing further was heard of the incident until January, 1959, when Vice President Nixon and Secy. Dulles told visiting Soviet Deputy Premier Mikoyan they believed that Moscow was withholding information on the 11 missing airmen. Mikoyan denied it.

THE TAPE RECORDING: Then on Feb. 6, with Mikoyan back in Moscow, the State Dept. released a transcript of what it said was a tape recording of an intercepted mid-air radio conversation among four Soviet fighter pilots attacking the transport plane five months before. The State Dept. said it was proof the Russians had shot down the plane. Soviet reaction was sharp. A Moscow radio commentator called it a "ultimo farce . . . The fake is so transparent that



a child could see through it. The script sounds as if it were written in Hollywood by someone who knew nothing of contemporary Russian language—or even of fighter plane tactics . . . The State Dept. ought to employ better script writers for their 'farces'."

The whole affair raised questions to which the State Dept. offered no answers.

• Why did the plane penetrate so deeply into Soviet territory—at the crash, when it was nearly 150 miles off its projected course?

• The Air Force had overhead infrared cameras shooting down the



BALLOON ENVELOPE AND SUPER-SNIPER RIG SHOWN IN PEKING

The Chinese say the equipment came off a downed American aircraft plane in Soviet territory, did it first report the plane had "disappeared" and "an intensive search was underway?"

• Why, if it interrupted the Soviet pilots' conversation, was it unable to record a message from the American plane either to its home base or to the Soviet planes?

• Why didn't the State Dept. mention the tape recording to Mikoyan and invite him to listen to it? Was the release of the recording—as a few newspapers suggested—timed to drum up anti-Soviet sentiment and forestall British Prime Minister Macmillan's trip to Moscow? The N.Y. Times (Feb. 7) said:

"There has been some speculation that the Government's action in making public the transcript of the conversation of the Soviet pilots was designed to stiffen U.S. and Western attitudes toward Moscow. Some commentators speculated that the move was aimed at halting the 'thaw' they professed to see in East-West relations."

ALTERNATIVES: Two possible alternatives to the State Dept. version were suggested. One plane had developed mechanical difficulties and crashed . . .

• Finally, and the 11 missing airmen had perished without a trace in the explosion and flames. Such things do happen. The very same day as the Armenia crash, for instance, an American C-124 transport with 19 aboard fell in the Pacific off Okinawa and an air-sea search team could find no survivors.

The second, more provocative, possibility was that the C-130, designed as a para-rope carrier, deliberately flew into Soviet Armenia to drop espionage agents in a Central Intelligence Agency operation. In his Feb. 16 Weekly, I. F. Stone quoted a Washington Star reporter:

"American officials scoffed as expected at the idea that a C-130 transport, unarmed, slow and unmaneuverable, would be sent on a dangerous intelligence mission. Others wonder, however, whether just this kind of plane might not make a good 'cover,' particularly if agents were to be dropped."

SOME PRECEDENTS: Certainly there were precedents for such a strategy. One example: in November 1952, an Air Force plane shot down in Manchuria. The plane had deviated in flight and crashed for Seoul on a routine flight to Tokyo. How it got to Manchuria—nearly the op-

posite direction—never was explained satisfactorily.

Two non-uniformed men captured by the Chinese, Richard Fecteau and John T. Downey, were tried, convicted and sentenced as spies: they were accused of trying to drop supplies to, and make contact with, Chiang agents. A group of American youths, visiting China after the 1957 Moscow Youth Festival, interviewed Fecteau in prison and reported his statement that he and Downey were CIA agents.

That the lusly-financed, super-secret CIA is engaged in espionage and sabotage against the socialist world is hardly open to doubt any longer. Turkey, along with West Germany and Taiwan, is a favorite base for CIA espionage. Periodically CIA spies are caught after sneaking into Armenia. Sometimes they confess.

TASS REPORT: On Feb. 15, nine days after the State Dept. released the tape recording, the Soviet news agency Tass reported that several groups of agents of the U.S. and Turkish intelligence services had been captured after crossing from Turkey. Said Tass:

"The spies were selected and recruited by members of the Karakesen and Kars section of the Turkish Intelligence Service . . . American Intelligence agents instructed the agents in methods of carrying out subversive activities in the Soviet Union, as well as in the handling of firearms . . . The American agents carefully examined them to find out whether they carried any trade marks of American origin and sternly warned them that in case of capture in the Soviet Union they must not admit the part played by Americans in their training . . ."

The U.S. is known to maintain monitoring devices along the Armenian frontier to record the activities of Russian airplanes and military installations. American espionage knew the Soviets were to be the first space missile to be launched. The first sputnik soared into the headlines. Harry Howe Ransom, a Harvard social scientist and author of Central Intelligence and National Security, said in the Christian Science Monitor (12-1-58):

In the case of Soviet sputnik, American Intelligence since 1954 by long-range radar tracking . . . [had] many clues where this sputnik came from and the origin of Soviet sputnik . . . [and] other bits and pieces of information are obtained by photoelectric surveillance of the unshielded electron orbits."

espionage, whatever can be gleaned from Soviet 'defectors,' and a wide range of other miscellaneous sources . . ."

THE BALLOONS: One snooping gadget Ransom neglected to mention was the balloon. U.S. balloon flights over Soviet territory reached a peak in early 1956. At that time Western correspondents in Moscow were shown 50 balloons the Russians said had been intercepted while on aerial reconnaissance missions for the U.S. It was charged that air wrecks and ground deaths were caused by exploding balloons.

Although Washington avowed that the balloons carried only weather-recording equipment, the correspondents noted radios to control the balloons' flight. The Russians said the radios enabled the balloons to cross the entire breadth of the Soviet Union in seven to ten days and then release aerial cameras by parachute into friendly hands.

The aerial cameras were to take photographs of cloud formations, the U.S. said. The Russians said they also took photographs of Russian topography. One captured balloon yielded very clear pictures of a U.S. airfield in Turkey.

THE DOUBTED WORD: Washington acknowledged that 500 of the gas-bags had been launched in less than a month from points in Western Europe and Turkey, denied the Soviet charges, but agreed to stop the flights.

That it did not keep its word was attested to—another coincidence in time—last Sept. 3, one day after the Armenia plane crash, when Moscow complained anew of U.S. balloon invasions. Three days later the "State Dept. confirmed that the balloons probably were there." (N.Y. Times, Sept. 7).

The Times' Hanson Baldwin wrote (2-12-58) that the most serious aftermath of the 1956 balloon incident was "the doubt cast upon the word of the U.S. government." He said the Russians had some pretty hard evidence . . . to convince them that the Washington answer was not the whole truth."

The question was: if Washington could



now be trusted to tell the whole truth on the balloon flights, could its word be trusted on the plane crash?"